

Oneshot Collaboration
by pagestravel

Category: Ranger's Apprentice
Genre: Adventure, Family
Language: English
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2016-04-13 00:06:44
Updated: 2016-04-27 05:37:53
Packaged: 2016-04-27 19:02:40
Rating: T
Chapters: 6
Words: 8,788
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: A series of oneshots co-authored by Raider1472, centered on my main series 'Lost'.

1. Chapter 1

**A/N: Surprise! During my hiatus between stories 7 and 8, you will get to enjoy oneshots. **

No I'm not writing these. Or rather, I'm writing them on my own...

During the Themes I brought in readers to write their own oneshots. These will be primarily written by Raider, whose Theme introduced a character who wormed her way into the main story. Thanks Raider! She has asked for readers to submit ideas for oneshots. If you have any requests leave them in the reviews.

I will be editing/rewriting (to fit Story 8's plot) and posting these. Even though I am not the primary author, I will ensure they all fit into the main story. Hope you all enjoy, and big thanks to Raider for taking this on!

Disclaimer: I'm not John Flanagan. Neither is Raider.

"Hey Gilan!" Robin heard Russ' voice echo loudly through the trees. Gilan responded in a much quieter manner. As Ranger Commandant, there was no need for him to yell.

Robin counted the seconds, remembering what Gilan had told the group. "Wait three minutes after Russ answers the door before you move into position," he'd instructed them. They hid about one hundred meters away, around the bend of the path.

One hundred forty-six, one hundred forty-sevenâ€|

Robin bounced eagerly on her toes and clutched the satin pillow in

one hand and the silver oak leaf in another. The leaves under her feet rustled, and with a quick, narrow-eyed glance from her father, she stopped instantly.

One hundred seventy-eight, one hundred seventy-nineâ€|

She glanced from her family to the other Rangers, collectively shared a nod before moving forward in a silent mass. The O'Carrick family went next. Kane was careful to lead Gabby only on the soft, silent dirt. Robin glanced around, ready to glare down any apprentice who frowned at Gabby with aggravation. Lucky for them, no one did. Following the O'Carricks was Brianne, Russ's girlfriend, from the local town in the Norgate fief. Brianne stood next to Robin.

"Can I hold something?" She whispered.

"Shhh!" Robin and others around them said sharply.

"Butâ€|" she started again.

"Shh!" Robin snapped. "Uncle Gilan asked me to do it,"

Brianne said nothing. She twisted her dress around her finger and rolled her eyes in annoyance.

Kane led Gabby closer to the cabin, winking at Daniel as he passed him. They stood close enough so that, so long as they were painfully quiet, they could hear everything inside.

"Hello Mathew, Russ." Robin imagined Gilan nodding to each of them. "Looking rather spiffy today, aren't we Russ?"

"I tried telling him not to expect much on graduation day, but still the boy wanted to look good. Don't know why, honestly." Mathew shrugged.

"Well I suppose we better get to it, before he tries to shine his shoesâ€|" that would rather defeat the purpose wouldn't it?" Gilan joked. "Congratulations for completing your blah, blahâ€| under Ranger Mathew. What else? Oh. Here are your scores from the Gatherings. Archery, unseen moving, throwingâ€| Seems mediocre enough. So if you sign hereâ€| and here. That should be it." Robin could only imagine Russ's bewildered expression and grinned.

"That's it?" Russ asked. Robin choked on her laugh.

"What did you expect?" Gilan asked, now speaking louder, pretending affront so everyone could hear.

Robin stuck her arm out to keep Brianne from moving from her concealed spot. Obviously the girl didn't understand the concept of a surprise or Gilan's plan that Robin was supposed to be the only one to be seen, at least at first.

Gilan continued. "We don't have all the funding for pompous occasions. At least we can afford your oak leaf. Where did I put it?" Robin imagined Gilan making a show of trying to find it. "Russ. Go out and see if you can find it. This trip was tiresome. Who decided to have a fief all the way out here? I just want a nice cup of coffee." The chair screeched as Gilan pulled it out from the table.

"Must've dropped the thing on the way in. Can't afford to have another one made!"

Robin shook with excitement as a grin broke out on her face. The door opened and Russ stepped out, seeing Robin standing on the path with the pillow in her hands. His eyes flashed to the silver oak leaf on top.

"What?" he trailed just before the giant roar of congratulations sent birds flying from the trees. He turned and saw the faces of all the Rangers emerge from the scenery. Scanning the area, he saw Gabby and Kane to the left. Gabby, grinning from ear to ear and Kane misty eyed. Russ took a step towards them when Holt practically leapt on top of him from where he was hiding behind the bushes. Aunt Alyss was there next to Julia and Maggie. Julia shifted Maggie to her hip and whistled using two fingers under her tongue. Maggie clapped madly at the excitement she was too young to fully understand.

Russ flushed with embarrassment upon seeing everyone. He found himself encircled by the well-wishers in no time. Brianne attempted to force herself to the front, but she ended up elbowed out of the way by other Rangers. Brianne found herself at the back of the group as Robin was pushed forward. Gilan clapped a hand on Russ' shoulder after emerging from the house.

"Did you find it, Robin?" Gilan asked.

"I've got it, Uncle Gil!" she assured him. The Rangers backed up to give her room. Their gap closed again before Brianne could worm her way to the front behind Robin. Russ stared at Robin with a wide grin of amazement. He had to kneel for her to reach the chain over his head. He wrapped an arm around her, bringing her feet a few inches off the ground as he straightened up. Robin kissed his cheek, as instructed, as her big brother threw his fist up in celebration. Everyone let out a second round of cheers and then started moving off towards a dell in the woods, where the faint smell of cooking venison began to permeate the air. Russ kept his arm looped around his sister.

Brianne made a big show of huffing. She turned on her heel and stomped off towards her home closer to the village. Russ noticed her but didn't follow. Instead, he kept Robin at his side. Kane caught his oldest son's sigh of relief when Brianne marched off. He whispered to Gabby, whose shoulders relaxed as though a huge weight had been taken off them. It wasn't easy for them to be gracious to the pretentious girl who not once supported Russ in his apprenticeship to Ranger Matthew, and freedom from entertaining her on Russ' day was all too sweet. As one of the only Rangers to complete his training in just three years, he earned every bit of celebration before his first assignment as Ranger began.

Robin couldn't help but smile every time she saw Russ glance down surreptitiously at his silver oak leaf. She even counted. He gave the oak leaf some kind of attention forty-three times during dinner, and that was just before Gilan told him it had belonged to Ranger Halt, the grandfather none of them got to know.

A/N: Now, an adorable moment Reese shares with Lily :) Again, big thanks to Raider for taking these on!

TheRanger'sDaughter: Glad you liked the first collab :) Feel free to PM your ideas to Raider or myself (just know that all I'll do is pass the list to Raider) if you don't want to leave them in a review. As I said, Raider will be the primary author of these. I'm just making sure nothing she writes conflicts with Story 8.

Disclaimer: I'm not John Flanagan. Neither is Raider.

Reese absolutely hated the set of rooms given to him for the trip to Roscrea. Even more, he hated the servants who flocked to him each and every morning. Some were Hibernian, but most were Araluens who traveled with his family. Those directly under him knew better than to invade his space. The Hibernians and extras did not. Each time he sent them away he wondered where Elizabet found the patience to deal with her equally frustrating lady-in-waiting Alicia day in and day out.

After breakfast with his parents, yet another servant's knock came at his door. The messenger bowed to Reese respectfully. Reese rolled his eyes. He hated being bowed to, as though he were above this messenger in some way.

"Good morning," the page greeted him with too much cheer for this particular hour.

Reese noted the colors and seal on the boy's shirt. Hazen. Great.

"Prince Hazen would like to accompany you on an afternoon ride todayâ€"if your highness would be so gracious."

Again? When would Hazen take the hint? Surely Jin or Robin had tipped the Hibernian prince off by now about his deal with his family. He had the events he would be expected to attend as part of his title. Horseback riding with Hazen wasn't one of them. Whether Hazen knew of the deal or not, it wasn't this boy's fault he had to deliver the invitation.

"I can't. I'm busy today," Reese told the poor page. The boy bowed and scurried down the hall. Reese sighed with relief and went off to find Lily. He did promise to take her on the loch, after all.

Reese wandered the castle's hallways trying to make his way to Frey and Rosalina's set of rooms. After a few wrong turns, one of which led him into a cleaning closet, he made it to their door, characterized by a small banner with Rosalina's crest. He rapped on the door. He was greeted by Camille, Rosalina's lady-in-waiting.

"Ah, Prince Reese," she said with a short curtsy. "What brings you here this morning?"

No sooner had she finished his name when Reese heard the high-pitched squeal of his young cousin on the other side.

"Reese! Reese!" Lily cheered. "He came for me today!"

"Put down your toast," Frey instructed his youngest with his thick Skandian accent.

Reese chuckled when he heard screech of a chair, followed by the patter of bare feet on stone. Lily's jam covered face stuck out in the gap between Camille's body and the door. Camille stepped out of Lily's sticky path. Reese scooped his cousin up up, jam and all, and walked into the breakfast table.

Iris, ever so proper, stared up at him with a hopeful gleam in her eye. "Will you eat with us, Reese?"

"Oh I wish I could," he said. "But I'm afraid I ate earlier."

Frey gave a relieved nod, all too happy to continue hoarding the bacon none of his girls would touch. Rosalina and Iris were too conscious of their figures while Lily preferred sweets. Reese would have forced him to share.

"But I could do with a bit more jam!" Reese teased, sticking out his tongue and leaning in close to Lily's cheek.

"No! Reese, no!" Lily squirmed in a fit of shrill giggles. Reese mercifully released her from his grip. She grabbed onto his hand instead. "Are you going to take me out to the loch today? You promised and we've been here such a long time already."

"It's been four days," Rosalina pointed out with a grin as she sipped coffee.

"Well, it feels like a long time."

"I would like to, but we need permission from your parents first," Reese said.

Frey shrugged. Rosalina nodded her approval.

"Want to come, Iris?" Reese asked, feeling the need to extend the invitation though he knew exactly what her answer would be.

"No. Mara's hosting a tea party. Lily, we both said we'd go," Iris said, giving her sister a pointed glare for the broken engagement.

"I'm sure Mara will understand. It's not every day Lily is asked by a crown prince to go out," Frey said with a wink to Reese.

"Off we go then," Reese said. Rosalina pulled Lily over and mopped her face with a cloth napkin dipped into her water glass before allowing her to leave.

Reese took Lily down to the kitchens first. A scullery maid was all too happy to fix them a picnic lunch. Obviously it wasn't every day someone royal spoke directly to her, which actually surprised Reese. He'd seen sweet Mara stow away to beg the chef for pastries between meals, and Gabe never hesitated to help himself to a simple sandwich if he missed a regularly scheduled meal. They took the basket and walked hand-in-hand to the loch where Reese already had a rowboat waiting. Lily chatted animatedly about whatever it was girls her age chatted about. Reese only half-listened, his mind far from his little

cousin's games.

The breeze off the lake felt good as Reese rowed. He enjoyed being able to work his arms after their voyage to Hibernia. He could see Lily was enjoying her time on the lake. She seemed to enjoy her life no matter where she was, both in castles surrounded by people and out in nature with few distractions. She hummed to herself and picked petals off water lilies she'd scooped up from the side of the boat.

Reese paused his rowing for a moment and stared at the clouds passing over the trees. How he wished this moment could never end. He knew that upon arrival back to the castle Hazen would be there, as well as his parents and the servants, all with expectations for him. Reese sighed.

"Lily," he began. She looked up from her decimated flower. "I need some advice."

Lily dropped the remainder of her flower into the water. She sat straight up and put her hands on her lap folded neatly. Reese couldn't help chuckling at her change in posture. This was how Rosalina taught her girls to sit when speaking to adults, what few occasions they were allowed to sit in the presence of an adult.

"Proceed," she said formally. Reese ducked his head to get control of his grin.

"Very well," he answered, trying his best to match her tone. He laughed again at his own weak attempt. His words came out softly. "I don't know how to be a king. What do kings do?"

"What?" Lily asked, forgoing formality and slouching. Like Reese, she couldn't be bothered to hold such an 'official' stance for long. The only difference was she would never be expected to.

"What must I do to become a good king?" Reese asked her, hoping she'd spout some uncanny wisdom spacey children like her were known for.

"Well, you're almost tall enough. That should count for something." She decided.

Reese shook his head at his young cousin. No wonder literally everyone liked having her around. "What do you mean I'm tall enough?"

"Well," she started in a calculated manner. "You're almost as tall as your daddy. He's really great. You're pretty great too. If you're like your daddy then you will be a really good king like he is."

Reese laughed, "I like your standards, Lily."

Lily absently fished another water lily from the loch.

"I feel bad for Hazen though," Lily added after several moments of silence.

"Why?" Reese asked. How could she possibly feel bad for Hazen? He had everything.

"He's shorter than you." Lily said simply.

Reese only smiled. "I suppose he is."

"Can I paddle now?" she asked, completely moving on from their conversation. Reese handed over a paddle. She gave a strong three strokes before it promptly flopped in the water. Reese should have foreseen that, given how small Lily was. Without a second thought Lily flopped in after it.

Something else he should have foreseen.

"Lily!" Reese called out. Her head bounced above the water, hair plastered to her face as she took a few strokes swimming towards it. "Come back!"

"You come in!" she squealed with a grin. Reese studied her in the water. Both of Frey's children had been taught to swim earlier than anyone else in the family. The only grief he'd get over this when he returned her was allowing her in with her shoes on.

Perhaps Hazen would avoid him if he was soaking wet too.

Reese removed his shoes, socks, and shirt before following Lily into the water.

3. Chapter 3

**A/N: I can see the traffic for these is similar to the traffic for the main stories. Y'all give Raider some love!
**

TheRanger'sDaughter: Reese is definitely a 'cool' older cousin for Lily :)

Disclaimer: I'm not John Flanagan. Neither is Raider.

The sun had just begun to set behind the trees, causing the leaves to cast long shadows on the path. The darkening shadows flickered as Russ rode his shaggy Ranger's horse, Neron, at an easy canter. As he rode he thought about the meeting he just had with the local Battlemaster. Matthew had sent Russ to speak with the stubborn knight about a strategy to gain new recruits for the fief. The meeting ultimately proved a waste of time. While the Battlemaster wanted new recruits, he didn't have the intelligence or resources for the idea he wanted to implement. Russ offered numerous solutions, but the Battlemaster disregarded each and every one without consideration.

"No, no," he'd said each time spoke up. "That will never work."

Russ would sigh, bottle up his annoyance, and sit through Sir Thompson's next round of fruitless babbling. The fresh faced Scribemaster finally started holding his hand up to Russ out of Sir Thompson's line of sight, shaking his head to hush Russ before he even spoke. When the meeting concluded and the staff members filed

out, he pulled Russ aside.

"Don't take it personally," he'd told him. "Thompson does that to everyone he deems as 'too young.' It took him a year before he even said hello to me and I saw him every day."

"Thanks," Russ replied. The scribe patted Russ's shoulder, and continued down the hall.

Always underestimated, Russ thought to himself. His parents had raised him to expect no special treatment from his superiors despite their close connection to so many royal families. Sometimes he wondered if his father had written all the masters in Norgate to be extra-tough with him.

As Russ rounded the corner of the trail, his thoughts quickly returned to the present when he noticed a figure in the distance stumbling along the path.

Drunk already, he thought disgust. Then he remembered what Matthew taught about focusing on one point too long. He quickly glanced around his surroundings to make sure the figure wasn't a diversion. Neron quickly caught up to the figure. It didn't take long for Russ to notice how the overlarge dark coat fit over feminine curves. Russ slowed Neron to a walk.

"Excuse me, miss?" Russ asked. The girl didn't respond. She shuffled along keeping pace with Neron.

"Miss?" Russ repeated.

The girl finally looked up to the hooded figure on the horse. Russ was taken back at how pale the poor girl's face was. She flinched when she looked at him and tilted her head, trying to figure out where the mottle cloak ended and the forest began. The effort proved too much.

The girl wobbled until she collapsed to the ground in a heap. Russ immediately dismounted and moved to help her, ready to check her vitals as his mother had taught him. She quickly pulled out a knife. Her hand shook too much to truly wield it. Russ stopped.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he assured her.

He noted the fresh blood still dripping from the blade. Russ pushed back his cowl and stepped forward slowly, sinking to a knee and took the knife from her trembling hand. Whether she released it purposefully or she was too weak to hold it longer he didn't know.

"What happened?" he asked in a tone he'd use with his younger sister.

The girl shook her head. Her dark hair was matted against her sweating brow and her eyes struggled to focus.

"Thieves," she whispered gruffly. She erupted into a coughing fit. Russ turned to Neron and pulled his water skin from the saddlebag. He offered it down to the girl, but she made no effort to take it. He held the skin up to the girl's lips as she sank lower on the one arm

supporting her sitting position. Her other arm was nestled closely against her side. Russ almost missed the sight of blood as her coat cast a shadow over her.

"Let me see that," Russ insisted, working on the buttons of her coat.

"He tried to kill me," she whispered. "I broke his hand and took his knife, but I didn't do a very good job of it," she managed to whisper. Her eyes fluttered. Russ stooped over and lifted the girl as she dropped off into a daze.

Russ gave the command for Neron to kneel so he could mount without disturbing this young damsels. He signaled Neron to stand and together they trotted off towards the village. Neron sensed exactly where Russ wanted to go. He trotted all the way to a local healer's home, the one so popular in this fief. Mistress Mary-Ellen had been trained by Malcom himself, and was much closer than the healers cottage in Castle Norgate's Forest.

Mistress Mary-Ellen did her job well, Russ knew. She had patched him up numerous times after intense training with Matthew and one of them ended up with injuries they didn't trust the other to handle.

It wasn't much farther to Mistress Mary-Ellen's cottage from Corbury road through the woods. Russ spotted the light streaming from her cottage. Chances were the family was sitting down to eat. Russ didn't want to intrude on their family time, but there was no way around it. His damsels couldn't wait much longer. Neron neighed a greeting as they came closer. As the sound was (perhaps a little too) familiar to the family, he was greeted by Mistress Mary-Ellen's husband, Roy.

Roy quickly appraised the situation and went to Russ on the horse. "Give her to me, son," he said in his usual gruff voice. Russ leaned the girl into Roy's arms. She muttered something unintelligible and stared through glassy eyes.

"Thanks," Russ grunted in reply and dismounted. He jogged to the door and opened it for Roy. Mistress Mary-Ellen noted the situation and draped a cloth over a couch at the edge of the sitting room. Roy laid the girl down gently. She let out a soft moan.

"She said she got knifed by thieves on Corbury road in the woods." Russ explained peaking over Mary-Ellen's shoulder. Mary-Ellen removed the girl's coat completely. Now that the coat and her arm were brought away from the wound, Russ could see just how long the gash in her side was. Her shirt wouldn't be worth saving between the blood and long rip down its side.

"I need to go tell Matthew," Russ said. I'll be back later tonight with payment."

Russ left the healer's home, mounted Neron, and raced back to the Ranger's cabin.

When Russ dismounted he let reins hang loose. He prepared himself for a scolding from Matthew as he was late for dinner, but Matthew only glanced up from the stack of reports a castle page dropped off earlier in the week.

"Russ?" Matthew asked as his apprentice swiftly entered the cabin and went directly to his bedroom. Russ came out with a silver tin, pouring some coins into one hand.

"Do you have 20 pence I can borrow?" Russ asked as he counted out his sum again.

"Russ," Matthew snapped in that commanding tone Russ hated so much.. "What's going on?"

Russ replied in a single breath. "On my way back from Norgate there was a girl who had been knifed in to woods. I took her to Mistress Mary-Ellen, but I don't have enough. Can I borrow 20 pence?"

"It costs 20 pence to sew up a wound?" Matthew asked, knowing full well Russ's mind was far ahead.

"No. It costs ten." Russ explained. "She broke the wrist of one of the thieves and I bet they are probably holed up in one of the taverns for now. He will want some whisky before they set his wrist."

Matthew nodded. He set down the reports, stood, and grabbed his cloak off the peg by the door. "All right. Let's go."

Russ felt a bit taken back at his mentor taking him seriously so quickly. The pair rode to the healer's home, Russ went in to pay for the services, and then he promised to stop back in the morning when she woke. They then continued onto the taverns.

Matthew and Russ alternated point as they stopped in the first two. One would enter with a flourish and while the other snuck in, scoping out the room during the distraction. In the third tavern, Russ spotted the group around a table by a fire. One had a heavily bandaged wrist and several drink glasses in front of him. Matthew caught Russ's eye, who imperceptibly nodded toward them. Russ approached the table with a grin and pulled up a chair. The others looked at him with a sense of surprise, disgust, and eagerness. They were so focused on his youthful face they didn't notice his weapons. Underestimated again. It was a matter of pride for Russ, after all.

4. Chapter 4

A/N: Anyone ever watch a new TV show and think, "Yeah. That's weird."?

TheRanger'sDaughter: Russ/Matthew is definitely reminiscent of Halt/Will.

Aubrey: Glad you're back! Lily is adorable. Makes her likeable.

Disclaimer: I'm not John Flanagan. Neither is Raider.

Wa-ter, Wa-ter, Wa-ter.

The cadence of the horse's hooves echoed through Maggie's mind. She

sat in front of him on the horse, one of his hands resting menacingly on her shoulder. His stench overpowered all of Maggie's other senses. Her own odor was far more foul than she was used to. She'd need a long, steaming bath to feel clean again. First, however, she needed a drink.

She had gone so long without taking anything from him—not even food or water. Even now he made a show of snacking on nuts as they rode. She licked her cracked lips. She tried swallowing to ease her thirst, but there was nothing to get down. Instead, she erupted into a fit of raspy coughs., earning her a hard pinch from her kidnapper. Her head throbbed. Quiet, salty tears crept down her cheeks, making her thirst only worse.

"Can I please have a drink?" she whispered..

His chuckle made Maggie shake in the saddle. "Of course, Princess Mara. Anything you wish." He pat her shoulder, sending chills down her spine.

Like before, the kidnapper guided the horse off the path deep into the woods before dismounting. He dragged her off the horse and shoved her to the ground.

"Now, remember what happens when you try to run," he said.

Maggie whimpered and rubbed the back of her head with a frightened nod. She remembered. Maggie attempted to bolt the first time they stopped. He quickly caught up, grabbed her by the arm, and clobbered her.

Now Maggie stood silently hugging herself while he reached into his saddlebag a skin of water and meat pies.

He put the skin of water aside and handed a pie to her. He gave her a mocking bow, complete with a smirk and flicking of his wrists. Maggie was too thirsty for this pomp.

"Can I please have some water?" she whispered again.

The man grinned a yellow smile. "Of course, Your Highness, but please allow me to pour it for you."

He took a smaller skin of water from his horse, grinning, and held it out to her. "Here you are, Princess. Just for you."

She took the skin warily giving it a shake. Don't take what a stranger gives you. She remembered her father's voice.

I'm too thirsty, Dad Maggie thought before taking a long gulp. And another. The taste was off, but she didn't really care. She knew her Grandpa Will's water ended up tasting a bit like leathery coffee if it was in the skin of water for a long time. Maybe it was something like that.

The water helped and the man let her drink as much as she wanted. The water felt good in her throat though her stomach threatened to reject it. A few bites of a meat pie helped it settle. Once she finished she only wanted to sleep.

He must've noticed her tiredness. "Please, feel free to rest princess. The trip has been long and I know the water has made you tired."

He was right, Maggie realized. She suddenly felt extremely tired. The man and the trees before her swam together and her eyes seemed to shut by themselves.

Maggie had never experienced a sleep so deep. Her dreams all consisted of traveling. She didn't mind too much. She traveled all the time with Grandpa Will and Grandma Alyss, but then a woman joined her dreams and she felt afraid for her. She seemed hurt, and even though Maggie wanted to help her, she couldn't. Her arms were too heavy and her feet moved too slowly. Still, the dreams about the new woman weren't bland or formless as the traveling ones were.

When Maggie finally woke she found herself by a fire with a coat she didn't recognize draped around her shoulders. She stared at the woman sitting across from her trying to figure out how she knew her.

"Maggie!" The woman exclaimed. "Do you recognize me?"

"Tammy?" Maggie squeaked with vague recognition.

"You have to get away," Tammy whispered as she crawled around the fire to sit closer to Maggie.

"Where are we?" Maggie asked. She gaped at Tammy's bruised face. "What happened to you?"

"Near Claymound, but off the main road. You need to get away Everyone is looking for you and that man is trying to hurt you."

Her memories came rushing back. The man and his sour smell and the strange tasting water. He had hurt a lot of people.

"But heâ€¢!" Maggie started, finding she couldn't finish.

"I know. Don't drink the water he gives you. I'll get you clean water," Tammy whispered to her in a desperate plea.

"I don't understand," Maggie said. She was close to tears and her stomach ached. She didn't know if the pangs were terror or hunger. "Why?"

Tammy gave her a sad smile. She cupped Maggie's cheeks and used a tone only mothers had. "Because he is trying to feed you something children should not eat."

Maggie didn't understand what Tammy was saying, but she didn't care. Not right now, anyway, "My stomach hurts. My head too."

Tammy scooted closer and wrapped her arms around Maggie's shaking frame. "I know, dear."

Tammy smoothed Maggie's hair and whispered in a calming manner. "When we get to the village you need to run. I'll distract him. Until then, you need to act as if you are barely awake. Remember, don't drink the water-."

Tammy broke off at the sound of crunching footsteps. Maggie's mind spun as she stared listlessly into space. It wasn't an act. She felt herself fall back into her dreams as seamlessly as she'd come out of them.

5. Chapter 5

A/N: Maggie Part 2

TheRanger'sDaughter: Yeah. Whoever decided to let him around children wasn't thinking.

Aubrey: Yes. He is.

Disclaimer: I'm not John Flanagan. Neither is Raider.

The leaves crunched under the man's feet as he approached Tammy's fire. They would camp tonight, as they did every night. He swung two rabbits from his snares as he walked, their heads lolling at awkward angles. Tammy quickly looked away not wanting to incite anything more than what she had already endured over the past few days as they travelled through village after village. He walked over to Tammy and dropped the rabbits in her lap. She flinched at the corpses' sudden appearance. She righted herself quickly to keep a hard slap from following.

"Clean them," he ordered in a gruff tone.

Tammy ducked her head in obedience. How had she reverted to such a servant status so quickly? Calvin hadn't been a good husband, but he hadn't treated her like his slave the way her first husband had. She paused a long moment considering her words before she said, "May I borrow a knife to do so?"

The man paused for several moments before answering.

"Of course."

He took a knife from his belt and dropped it, point down, inches from Tammy's hand. She withdrew her hand quickly while the man laughed and walked to the edge of the clearing searching for a stick to serve as a spit. Tammy had to remind herself that, unlike Maggie, she was here willingly, posing as a weak woman who needed protection on her travels. Perhaps it wasn't as much of a pose as she thought.

Tammy moved away from Maggie to protect her from the mess of cleaning rabbits. As Daniel and Julia's daughter Maggie could probably take the task herself without batting an eye, but in her drugged state Tammy couldn't be sure of anything. She had that glazed look in her eye, proof she was currently dosed. Tammy protected her from some of the drug, but couldn't save her from all. Bringing her off completely now would probably be a bad idea anyway.

While Tammy cooked, she noticed their kidnapper fiddling with the water skin he handed exclusively to Maggie at meals. More drugs. He set the spiked water skin next to Maggie and then put the one he and Tammy drank from next to her. Tammy narrowed her eyes. He checked on dinner and then went to look over his horse. Tammy immediately

snatched Maggie's water away from her and emptied the entire skin into the ground. The worms could enjoy the warmweed laced water. Maggie had enough. She took the skin of clean water and filled Maggie's smaller skin halfway.

"I'm thirsty," Maggie whispered to Tammy, reaching for the skin. Tammy quickly used her skirt to wipe warmweed residue from the top and let her take it. She sighed as Maggie drank. How had the daughter of the Ranger Commandant and his resourceful wife found herself in this position? Surely they were looking for her. Why hadn't they found her?

Glancing behind him, the kidnapper said, "Drink up, Your Grace."

As she had since Tammy joined them, Maggie tilted back her head and finished off the entire skin.

"Dinner's ready," Tammy announced.

The man nodded and held his hand out to Tammy.

"Knife," he ordered. Tammy swallowed her anger and handed him the knife she had been hoping he would forget about. He smirked when she handed it over, disregarding her as a threat. Tammy sighed. Of course she wasn't a threat. She was just a woman unlucky enough to grow up believing she needed a man to protect her. Now that no woman had to rely on a man, she had no skills to attempt independence. Even now she knew she'd rely on Elizabeth's kindness to build yet another life for herself.

At least this time it wasn't a man.

The man slept in his cramped, poorly made tent while Maggie and Tammy shivered in the open air under Tammy's cloak close to the dying embers. Maggie's body shook and she moaned slightly in her sleep. Tammy hugged her close trying to keep the girl warm. It was a restless night.

The next morning, Tammy awoke when the man dumped water onto the smoking fire. It steamed and hissed, flecks of wet ash jumping onto Tammy's face. She opened an eye in annoyance.

"Time to move," he huffed. He nudged "Wake up, Princess Mara."

Maggie moaned and rolled over, trembling slightly. He looked at her curiously.

"I think she's ill," Tammy said, trying to cover for Maggie's unusual behavior. When fully on the drug, Maggie did what she was told, and stared listlessly all the while in between. Shaking meant she needed a stronger dose. "It was cold last night."

While Tammy tried to get Maggie on her feet, Tammy could feel the eyes of the man staring at her. She glanced behind her and he broke eye contact. He moved to the horse and took Maggie's water skin. Even from a distance Tammy could see it was full. He'd filled it. No doubt it was also freshly dosed.

Tammy turned back to Maggie and adjusted the tattered coat he'd given

her before Tammy joined them. Maggie would ride while Tammy and the man, who changed his name with almost every village, walked. She had probably walked a quarter of Hibernia by now and her feet hurt at the very thought.

Tammy took advantage of fixing the twisted collar and whispered, "Today."

She hoped the Maggie she knew was awake inside and understood.

The man returned with Maggie's water skin. "Drink," he ordered, and stared them down into obedience. Maggie held the skin to her lips and tilted back her head, taking a long drink. "You too," he told Tammy.

Tammy pretended to sip and swallow, not daring to part her lips. She glanced quickly at Maggie, praying that the girl remembered her instructions after whatever residue of the drug touched her lips. The man turned away to fix a saddle bag.

While his head was turned, Maggie coughed violently into her arm. A mouthful of water spilled to the grass.

"Good girl," Tammy whispered. The man drank from his own skin, the one he used to share with Tammy. Maggie glanced at Tammy, nodded slightly, and then quickly looked away again, staring into space.

Once the horse was geared up the man walked over and grabbed Maggie by the arm, dragging her to the horse. "Time to go," he said and put the girl in the saddle. Before moving off, he took a roll of warmweed from its packet in his pocket, squeezed Maggie's cheeks to open her jaw, placed the dose directly in her mouth, and then gave her a light slap on the cheek. It took a few minutes but Maggie coughed again, gagging what hadn't dissolved up into spit. Tammy sighed with relief.

Maggie had remembered! Underneath her bruised mask, Tammy was ecstatic. Today they were going to escape when they came to the next village, and she knew they would. Tammy knew this area well. She could get them back to Roscrea once they were away from this man.

From the distance, a green speck grew larger as another traveler passed down the road. It was a young woman wearing a green cloak with Roscrea's insignia embroidered on the front. A Hibernian Courier.

Without warning, Maggie leapt off the horse, crashed to the ground, and ran to the young Courier before Tammy could stop her.

"Please, help us! He's kidnapped us! I need to go back to the castle!" she screamed at the Courier.

Tears flowed down Maggie's face in desperation. The Courier's eyes widened. She began to draw the lightweight sabre from under her cloak. Just then Tammy heard the rush of air and the Courier fell from her saddle, a knife embedded in her chest. Maggie screamed, and the man laughed at her fear. He urged the horse over to where Maggie stood sobbing, staring at the girl who was alive just thirty seconds

before.

Tammy knew that this was the moment, although not the right one. Tammy, still walking alongside the horse, reached for the knife she'd used to skin the rabbits the night before. She then lunged for the cruel man.

"Run Maggie!" Tammy yelled. Maggie looked at Tammy. She grabbed the Courier's bag and darted away. "Run to the village! I'll find you there!"

The lanky 10 year-old, though weak, disappeared through the trees.

Tammy was out of time. The man shoved her over a fallen log. "I took you in after you pleaded with me for safety!"

"I'm sorry," Tammy blubbered while trying to think of a plan. He took a shot to her gut. She dropped the knife. She didn't even see his next swing before he struck her in the eye. Tammy fell over top of the Courier, the girl's blood seeping through her dress. Lights flashed in her eyes and she immediately felt that eye swell, but not before she noticed the knife in the dead courier's chest. Tammy quickly drew it out, ignoring the stickiness, and condensed into a protective ball.

The man in his rage noticed nothing. He kicked viciously at Tammy's back, two, three times. Then without warning, and a speed attributed to adrenaline, Tammy spun herself around and lashed at the man. She aimed blindly and somehow found his throat. He staggered and fell on the ground, blood pooling around him in a thick puddle.

Tammy's eyes widened. She felt sick, but that didn't last long. Her mind went to Maggie.

"Maggie!" she called. "Maggie! Where are you?"

Only birds answered her cry. Tammy mounted the horse and took off towards the village. Maggie may have been in Araluen the past few years as her father became Commandant, but she traveled with her mother all through Hibernia before that. Surely she remembered this trail. Tammy would find her in the village and take her home. After all this Tammy would need to find someone to travel with. That could get expensive, but Mason and Scout would surely pay for Maggie's return. After all, they were her godparents and she was among their daughter's closest friends. For a moment Tammy thought about collecting Maggie and turning back to Claymound, but decided not to. She'd have to lie and say Maggie was indeed Mara for him to help her. He paid the girls so little attention he wouldn't know the difference. Mara he would be obligated to help by his service to the crown.

But Maggie? To Calvin she was just Daniel and Julia's daughter. He didn't mind Daniel too much. As their liaison he'd made an effort to assimilate into Hibernian locals and was popular among them for his good nature and willingness to help when he could. Julia, however, had played chaperone for Elizabet's visits too many times for Calvin to like her. He considered her and Warden his greatest enemies. Helping Maggie wouldn't interest him. In fact, he may even go so far as to block Maggie from getting home out of spite.

Or take her to Roscrea demanding a reward.

They couldn't go to Claymound. Tammy would have to find another route, but first things first.

She needed to find Maggie.

6. Chapter 6

A/N: Look at Mara. Again, big thanks to Raider for doing these!

TheRanger'sDaughter: Daniel and Julia definitely wouldn't have let him get off so easy. Tammy may not be a trained soldier like the others, but she definitely protects Maggie.

Disclaimer: I'm not John Flanagan. Neither is Raider.

Mara stared out the window watching the gardeners pull at the weeds. She pulled at the hem of her Academy uniform. The uniform was borrowed from one of the smaller students, but it was a little big on her.

A clatter on the lab bench jolted Mara from her daydreaming. She saw Caitlyn's test dishes roll along the table, the latest remnants of her experiment pooling on the tabletop.

Mara moved to clean up the mess before Caitlyn even spoke.

"Thanks," nodded to her as she whipped Little Lina up to her hip. She brought her little girl to work with her about as often as Scout brought Mara, but though the splatter wasn't toxic to the skin Lina didn't need to be left to put it in her mouth.

"It's not a problem."

Mara tried to keep emotion out of her voice, employing her court mask. Mara grabbed the sample dishes and put them in to soak in the basin. She turned back to the table with a wet rag.

Caitlyn leaned against the table frowning. Mara imagined her arms would've been crossed if her free hand wasn't busy trying to get Lina to release her fistful of hair.

"What is it?" Caitlyn demanded of Mara.

Mara gave a court smile and, as if forced by the smile, tears sprung up in her eyes.

"Nothing," Mara answered lightly. She reached around her aunt to wipe down the bench.

Caitlyn put a hand on Mara's shoulder. Mara met her eyes.

"Mara."

Unbidden, sobs broke through Mara's mask. "I know you said it wasn't

my fault, it's justâ€|"

She raised her arm to wipe away her streaming eyes.

Caitlyn took the rag from Mara's hand and wrapped her in a hug. Lina moved to play with Mara's hair the moment it came into reach.

"Lina," Caitlyn scolded, lightly slapping her daughter's hand. Lina let go and clapped to herself.

Caitlyn rubbed Mara's back. "I know, honey. It's hard."

Mara pulled a handkerchief from her pocket to wipe her face. She looked at the embroidered initials. These initials that started a fire, burned her cousin's fiancÃ©e, and kidnapped Maggie. It was hard not to hate those initials at that moment.

"You did everything you were supposed to do,.." Caitlyn told her soothingly and took the handkerchief and wiped her niece's tears.

"Except I talked to that man!" Her sobs turned into hiccups. "I was trying to be friendly. Mama and Papa always said to be friendly."

"Mara. Look at me," Caitlyn said sternly. Mara brought her eyes to meet her aunt's. "You are not allowed to be mad at yourself about this. It is not your fault. It's the guards' fault for not noticing. None of this is because of you. It is because some lunatic had some insane ideas. Everyone is out searching for Maggie right now, and she will be found. Do you understand?"

Mara sniffed and nodded her response. With her eyes to the ground, she walked back to the basin and began washing the dishes.

"Leave it. An apprentice on cleaning duty will mind those."

"Yes, Aunt Kate."

Mara wiped her hands on a towel and the three left the lab. Lina, completely oblivious to her cousin's turmoil, happily sucked on her own fingers while being carried on her mother's hip.

Caitlyn took Mara's hand and led her out of the building. Mason and Scout had sent four guards to watch over Mara on rotation. The two on duty fell in step behind them without a word. The Academy itself doubled its night watch and, though every student there knew exactly who Mara was, they followed instructions to call her Maggie and pretend she wasn't special. The royal family visited the Academy so often that was almost too easy to do.

Caitlyn led her down the path towards the building with her apartment. As they walked, Caitlyn nodded to a gardener minding a bed of flowers.

"Hello Henry," she said cheerfully, hiding all traces of the serious tone she'd had before.

"Hullo Professor!" The man dusted the dirt off his knees as he stood

to chat with them. "Ms. Lina, always a pleasure." He nodded to the little girl before shaking her hand. Lina gurgled a laugh, which made everyone grin.

"Henry," Caitlyn began slowly. Though word had circulated to refer to Mara as Maggie, it could never be guaranteed instructions made it to grounds staff. "Have you met Maggie? She's a family friend visiting from Araluen."

Mara put out her hand. "Hello, sir. Nice to meet you. You have a very lovely flower garden."

Mara kept her tone cordial. She wasn't used to offering her hand, to be honest. Usually she was exchanging curtsies and bows when greeting people.

"Well thank you miss. But it's the Academy's garden," he said with a grin.

"And it wouldn't look nearly as good without you," Caitlyn assured him.

Henry laughed. "Thank you," he said as he tucked away the praise. The Academy gardeners were an elusive bunch almost as mysterious as the Araluen Rangers. He turned back to Mara, who was again playing with the hem of her uniform. "Do you know a lot about flowers?"

She grinned and thought of the gardens back in Roscrea. Bringing nature into the castle walls was a priority for both her mother and Kineta before her. "My mama has a nice garden behind our house. I like to draw the flowers, and sometimes the gardeners let me help them."

Caitlyn quickly reached to grip Mara's shoulder. Henry knew who Mara was, but they couldn't trust potential eavesdroppers. She needed to pose as Daniel and Julia's daughter until they got home. Julia didn't employ gardeners, and in Araluen they lived in the Commandant's apartment rather than a house.

"Do you think Maggie would be able to help you sometime this week? I'm afraid my lab is boring her," she quickly covered.

Mara glanced at Caitlyn with a grin and looked back to Henry.

"Of course," he said to Caitlyn and looked back to Mara. "I'll be working in front of the testing rooms tomorrow if you wish to join me."

"That would be great!"

For the first time in a long while, real joy came back into Mara's voice and they both smiled.

On the way back to Caitlyn's apartment she babbled about the flowers she saw and ones from home. Caitlyn would interject and show her which plants she'd used for her research. Tucker, being resourceful, enforced only useful plants be planted among the grounds. The gardeners made it a game to see who could make their beds beautiful.

"Maybe one day you can come to the Academy and learn about the plants."

Mara paused her steps to think for a moment. "I'd like that," she said, then added. "Do you think Maggie would want to come to the Academy too?"

Caitlyn pulled Mara back into a hug, "If she wanted to, I'm sure she could. But we'd have to talk to Uncle Will and Aunt Julia."

"They would say yes, I'm sure."

The three came upon the apartment and Carter ran outside. Mara first thought he was coming to greet them, but noticed his slightly panicked look. "Mom! Come quick! Dad's trying to make dinner again!"

Mara laughed, but Caitlyn put down little Lina for Mara to walk with and jogged into the house.

"Tucker!" Mara heard her aunt call out. "We both know you can't cook!"

Mara walked into the house with Little Lina and saw her uncle grinning. All he'd done to send his son into a panic was chop the vegetables Caitlyn put aside that morning for tonight's dinner. He pulled Caitlyn to his waist and gave her a quick kiss. "How do you expect me to get better if you don't let me practice?"

"Oh, I'll let you practice," Caitlyn told him. She winked at Mara as she came in the door. "Let's start with something easy. How are you at boiling water?"

End
file.